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ABSTRACT

Both research and the gay community opinion have relied primarily on stereotypes in their ignorance of the older lesbian. A preliminary study of the close friendship patterns of older lesbians is underway in San Francisco, where gay community life is more visible than in other cities. Even there, lesbians are more underground than gay men. Most roles traditionally served by family members are filled by long-term close friends. Lovers affected the time spent with close friends, but the relationship of lovers was often less stable. Problems of social loss remain as an unresolved issue cloaked in secrecy without institutional support. (LS)

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CLOSE FRIENDSHIP PATTERNS OF OLDER LESBIANS

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Panel on the Older Lesbian
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CLOSE FRIENDSHIP PATTERNS OF OLDER LESBIANS

In the past decade, coincidental with the resurgence of the womens' and gay rights movements, there has been an explosion of research in the behavioral sciences on homosexuality. Since the nature of the gay community is such that because of their social patterns, male homosexuals are more visible than lesbians and because there is still a male bias in research, there has been a plethora of work on male homosexuality, while research on lesbianism has been underrepresented. Yet, though many aspects of the lives of homosexuals have been documented, there is still one area in which even among community members as well as among outside researchers, there is still stereotyping and a lack of understanding. This area is the lives of older lesbians who are often depicted as devalued on the sexual marketplace, therefore bitter, isolated and alcoholic. For example, at the Western Gerontological meeting in Tucson in the spring of 1978, there was a panel on gay and aging for the first time. When one panel member asked the audience, many of whom were gay, what came to mind when they thought of older lesbians, several people said they didn't even know there were any, while others adherred to the stereotype of the bitter, role-playing, lonely bar dyke. If even among members of the same community so little is known, it is clear that it is time for this heretofore ignored group, the older lesbian, to come out of the closet—at least in terms of research. That is the reason for this panel (Older Lesbians Gerontological Society Annual Meeting, November 17, 1978, Dallas, Texas). It should be added that some attention has already been paid to older lesbians, most notably Mina Robinson's work on lesbians fifty years and older, and the C.H.E.E.R. project, headed by Fred Miningerode and Marcy Adelman at San Francisco State University in which the lives of older lesbians and gay men over sixty are compared with those of a matching heterosexual control group.

In terms of gerontological literature, there is need for this research. In much of the literature there is an assumption that a major factor in successful adjustment to the aging process presupposes being anchored in a heterosexual marriage with close kinship ties and with close ties to children and grandchildren, all which function as a support network for the aging family member. However, because of a high divorce rate, the level of mobility in our society, the increasing number of people who choose not to have children as well as the largely unpublicized but certainly existing antipathy to their children or parents that some people experience, as well as the growing awareness that some people are temperamentally unsuited for living with a permanent partner, it is evident that this harmonious ideal was more suited to an earlier, more bucolic time in our nation's history. Therefore, from the point of view of building theory, it is useful to look at successful adaptation to the aging process among a group of people to whom these traditional supports are less available. Older lesbians fit this category.

There is another reason why it is appropriate to look at the coping mechanisms in the lives of older lesbians in relationship to aging. Older lesbians, as have gay men, had to contend with being stigmatized in our culture relatively early in their lives, yet, unlike other minorities they were not socialized from infancy to deal with being a member of a stigmatized group. The aging in our culture, as well, often find themselves stigmatized without having earlier preparation for dealing with it. It is likely that some of the coping mechanisms that homosexuals have developed to contend with stigma stand them in good stead later in life when they face the double stigma of gay and aging. It is useful, therefore, to understand what these mechanisms are when we address ourselves to other stigmatized groups, in this case, the aging in America.

My own work focuses on middle-aged and aging lesbians and gay men, forty years old to retirement, and post-retired, with a smaller heterosexual comparison group. It concerns itself with the ways in which respondents manage their lives throughout the second half of the life cycle and has a special emphasis on how what Lowenthal and Haven cite as "the lifelong need for intimacy is met (Lowenthal, Marjorie Fiske, and Clayton Haven,"Interaction and Adaptation:Intimacy as a Critical Variable", American Sociological Review, 33/1, Feb 1968). What I am going to report on are some of the aspects of how older lesbians manage their lives and the function close friends fill in this process.

Since I am still in the interviewing and fieldwork stages, I can only report on trends. Before doing so however, it is useful to make a few preliminary points. The research is being carried out in San Francisco, a city with an estimated gay population of between 90,000 and 200,000 out of a total population of about 700,000. Since it is widely known as a city in which gay rights are taken seriously and in which the gay population has some political clout, while it is perhaps a little easier to solicit respondents in such a milieu, it is likely that it is not--that mythic beast— a "representative sample". Nevertheless, it is useful to document lesbian lives in what might be close to optimal social conditions in a country in which there is still oppression of the rights and lives of gay people.

Though gay men and lesbians have faced and continue to face the same kinds of repression (the widely publicized efforts of Anita Bryant and the recent Briggs initiative in California as well as loss of job, housing and children are some examples) functionally, lesbians and gay men inhabit two separate communities with very different modes of behavior and expectations. In San Francisco as with gay communities elsewhere, the male community is much more visible and seems interested in a more stylish form of consumption as part of self-presentation, while the women's community, though having projects throughout the city

addressed to its needs, is more underground. Though too simplistic, it is almost as though the middleclass male community, because of a generally higher income and the nature of self-presentation tends more toward capitalism, while the lesbian-feminist community influenced by feminist ideology and living on a more subsistent level of income, is more socialist in nature. Because of these financial differences and different foci of interest, except for coalitions for common purposes, lesbians and gay men tend to socialize publicly in separate places.

In both communities there are organizations specifically addressed to members "over forty"; therefore, it appeared that forty was a significant age to community members and so it was chosen as a baseline for delineating the second half of life in this research. As was mentioned, the present research is structured so that a comparison is possible across age, sex, role and affectional preference lines--male and female, gay and straight, forty to retirement, and post-retirement. The focus for self-accessment of respondents is based on an open-ended topic guide in an intensive interview situation, supplemented by ethnographic material on social and working life. The final sample should consist of at least one hundred and fifty interviews anchored in an ethnographic context. It is anticipated that cohort membership is especially important to self-image among older lesbians, who have faced a lifetime of need to maintain secrecy, especially during the Armed Forces purges of World War II and the McCarthy era. The more recent affirmation of the feminist movement may have influenced the self-image and presentation of younger members in a way that members of the older cohort may not be able to adjust to after a lifetime of secrecy.

In structuring the research, I hypothesized that because of the stigma and need for secrecy, close family ties may be less available to the older lesbian than to a heterosexual population, though not entirely lacking, and that lesbians

are likely to have fewer children. Therefore, in order to meet the need for intimacy that Lowenthal and Haven refer to, they have developed other means of support, and it is likely that these are anchored in close friendships with other lesbians which are carried throughout the lifecycle and which often function as fictive kin. Among the thirty-two women who have been interviewed so far, the tentative findings have born this out.

Except for one women who fit the category of "lifelong social isolate" in that she never had close intimate ties and felt she did not need them, all of the women interviewed had at least two and often as many as five close friends, many who had been close for at least a decade. When I asked what their definition of a close friend was, most answered with "someone I can confide in; who understands me, who I can count on". They saw these responsibilities as reciprocal.

One concern of the research is to elicit the choreography of friendship. Therefore, some of the questions had to do with roles traditionally served by family members. When asked with whom one spent birthdays and holidays, the response was "my close friends" with the exception of two women who spent these times of celebration with the remaining members of their families who lived nearby. It seemed that the most telling question in measuring degrees of closeness and commitment was "who is included in your will?" Unless there were children involved, all of the respondents had included their close friends in their wills, if only to leave them some personal possession, sometimes omitting family members altogether. Many of the women had talked about plans for aging and retirement with their close friends and, though none of these plans had been put into practice as yet, it indicates attention to alternative ways of dealing with old age and acknowledges the function of longterm close friends in their lives. It is interesting to note that in contrast to male

gay respondents, many of the close friends of older lesbians consisted of former lovers who, after a cooling off period, had become close friends and confidents.

As with heterosexuals, living with a lover affected the quality and amount of time spent with close friends but in most cases lesbians arranged to see their close friends more often, even if living with a partner, realizing that maintaining this kind of intimacy was necessary for them as well. In many cases, it was the close friend network that lasted for several decades, while there sometimes was a more rapid turnover of lovers.

Since we are dealing with an older population, some of the problems of social loss highlight ways in which homosexuals in our culture are still stigmatized. For example, with the death of a longtime partner, there is no institutionalized grieving process, especially if secrecy has had to be maintained. Even if there is a will leaving property to a partner, the deceased's family can often contest it as being made under "undue influence". If there is no will, even if the property is held in common, the next of kin often inherits anyway. Some of the women in my study had already faced these problems and had contended with them fairly well, counting on the support of their close friends during these times of stress. What most of the women feared was being disabled with noone to take care of them or being financially dependent. It is here again that new forms of holding property in common and of banding together to care for each other, as families traditionally did were evident.

In closing, I might add that the bleak picture of the isolated older lesbian is contrasted with the lives of members of my population who have contended with many of the vicissitudes of life with spirit, with dignity and with the help of close lifelong friends.